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## THE PALIMPSESTIC TIME AND IDENTITY IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S *EVER AFTER*

ELISABETA SIMONA CATANĂ

POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest, FILS-DCLM

**Abstract:** *The essay analyses Graham Swift's Ever After and shows that the concepts of time and identity are fictional constructs which stand for a palimpsestic world presented as an eternal stage of past and present stories. Time and identity are revealed to us through symbols which stand for a palimpsestic world. They are reinvented and rewritten according to the narrator's vision.*

**Key words:** *identity, palimpsest, past, present, time, the world.*

### 1. Introduction

A postmodernist novel which evokes a palimpsestic world in symbols and which associates the Real with Fiction and with an illusion, Graham Swift's *Ever After* consists of 22 chapters focusing on the story of Bill Unwin, the narrator and the main character of the novel. He investigates his past, expressing his thoughts and evoking his memories in an attempt to highlight the importance of three themes: 1) the ever repeated pattern of past times to be recognized in the present stories and events; 2) identity as a palimpsest; 3) the world as a palimpsest on an eternal stage. The 22 chapters of the novel do not introduce a chronological story but just Bill Unwin's remembrances and his reinterpretation of the past from his perspective and cultural experience. Bill Unwin, a former academic and professor of English Literature, comes to write this novel following a big disillusion regarding his past life and identity. In the aftermath of a failed attempt to commit suicide, Bill Unwin wonders who he is, presenting us bits and pieces of his past, of his childhood remembrances. He admits that he has reinvented the past and its protagonists following his recovery from a desperate suicidal act. He refers to the past as to "a foreign country" (Swift 1992:243) and to his words as coming from "a dead man" (Swift 1992:3).

Analysing Graham Swift's concepts of time and identity in the novel *Ever After*, this essay focuses on the theoretical support offered by: 1) Mark Currie (1998:17) who develops the idea that "identity exists only as narrative"; 2) Linda Hutcheon (1988) who explores the concept of "historiographic metafiction" and shows that the past and identity are reconstructed in this type of postmodernist fiction; 3) Patricia Waugh (1996) who defines the concept of metafiction and emphasizes the role of metafictional strategies in postmodernist fiction writing. This essay shows that Graham Swift's *Ever After* illustrates and reinforces the above-mentioned theorists' ideas by introducing us to a recreated past time and to redefined identities, and by unveiling postmodernist metafictional strategies. Throughout the novel, the reader is invited to imagine the past as if he were an onlooker at the theatre. The 22 chapters look like scenes on a theatre stage frequently introduced by "I see", "I watch", "You have to picture this" (Swift 1992), suggesting to the reader that what he reads about past times and identities is nothing but pure fiction. Moreover, the frequent references to William

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the comparisons between William Shakespeare's fictional characters and Bill Unwin and his relatives suggest the idea that the world and time are palimpsestic and recreated on an eternal stage that the readers have to carefully analyse.

Fiction, poetry, diary fragments, letters and drama are mixed in the novel whose title, *Ever After*, is an allusion to the present past, to the eternal present of life events, plots and outcomes. The concept of life *ever after* evoked by Bill Unwin's narration suggests that the past is frequently revisited, reconstructed and lived again: "This is my second life, my reincarnation. Perhaps there is life and life again, always and for ever. Perhaps the world has been reinvented for me in its full potential. This is the Garden of Eden. And here comes Eve" (Swift 1992:88). Time becomes a palimpsest. Nothing is new but the story told by Bill Unwin in a unique manner. Everything loses life and energy but the words whose power to fictionalize the past and the world prevails over our limited, mortal nature. Bill Unwin's memories of his past happy life with his beloved wife whom he has just lost represent what he calls "happiness ever after" (Swift 1992:132). He admits that his novel "commemorates [...] happiness ever after" (Swift 1992:132). Moreover, the concept of *ever after* is an allusion to a palimpsestic present which is highly reminiscent of the past. Imbued with the memories of the past, the present becomes dissatisfying and devoid of creative energy and strength. The present just draws its energy from the past which is thoroughly investigated in Graham Swift's novel and associated with the symbols of the *clock* and the *Notebook*.

## 2. The Palimpsestic Time and Identity in Graham Swift's *Ever After*

In Graham Swift's *Ever After*, the concept of time is not only an abstract concept but also a human construct. It is a redefined and a reinterpreted time. Thus, the past, which is a haunting presence in the life and memories of Graham Swift's narrator, Bill Unwin, turns into his own story. He compares the present with the symbol of *plastic*, which stands for a dissatisfying creation associated with a low-quality material made by the human hand. Unable to accept the present, Bill Unwin returns to the past to investigate it and to understand what his real identity is and who his real father was. Having been told two different stories about his real father, Bill Unwin decides to find the truth by studying alleged historical documents. The first story about his real father comes from his childhood when colonel Unwin, whom Bill has known to have been his real father, commits suicide allegedly due to his wife's affair with Sam, Bill's future adoptive father. This story makes Bill Unwin consider himself a kind of Hamlet ready to take revenge against Polonius, associated with Sam, his mother's second husband. When his mother dies, his adoptive father tells him a different story claiming that colonel Unwin committed suicide after his wife had told him that Bill was not his real child. Examining and clarifying this issue, Bill discovers that he has never met his real father who was an engine driver and who died at war.

In his attempt to recreate the past and his own identity, Bill Unwin presents the world as an eternal stage where he can see his past life events and relatives dominated by the spirit of the fictional characters in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Most characters in Bill's story are compared with famous characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Redefining the theatre and poetry as "only mirrors for our lost, discredited souls" (Swift 1992:263), Bill compares the human beings with immortal figures wearing an "amoral mask" (Swift 1992:108). He associates himself, his dead beloved wife, his parents and friends with actors wearing the mask of the present on the pattern of the past. Bill Unwin is convinced that his dead beloved relatives and ancestors reflect the spirit of William Shakespeare's characters as he strongly believes that "the people go; the patterns remain" (Swift 1992:53). Moreover, Bill Unwin compares himself with Hamlet for his thirst for vengeance. He compares Sam, his adoptive father, with Claudius. He compares Ruth, his dead beloved wife and a famous actress, with

Ophelia. He also compares Ruth, who died from lung cancer because of too much smoking, with Cleopatra, whose role she had played on the stage: “And no one, [...] alluded to the fact that Cleopatra is a woman who, with serene and regal deliberateness, commits suicide” (Swift 1992:125). Bill Unwin admits that he used to play a difficult role on the stage of life. Furthermore, he seems to be playing that role on the stage of his own novel: “I had to play this scene. I understood how hard it is to act. The lines were so awful, so unconvincing” (Swift 1992:125). Having survived a desperate suicidal act and feeling that he has taken on a new identity, Bill Unwin claims that he is wearing a mask the same as an actor: “When I look in the mirror (especially these days), I see this incorrigible mask. I know it’s not me, but I’m stuck with it” (Swift 1992:128). His failed suicidal act and his tormenting inner pain make him question the old clichés that life goes on and that every Jack has his Jill. He argues against these clichés by making contrasting sentences: “Our wooing doth not end like an old play; Jack hath not Jill. It’s not the end of the world. It is the end of the world [...]. Life goes on. It doesn’t go on” (Swift 1992:131). According to Patricia Waugh (1996:139-140), this contrast of ideas is a metafictional strategy:

Metafiction, however, is more interested in the juxtaposition of contradictory words and phrases which foreground processes of linguistic selection, rather than the surrealistic juxtaposition of extremely disparate images and objects (Waugh 1996:140).

By these contrasting sentences, Bill Unwin suggests that nothing is new but palimpsestic and recreated by our minds the same as he recreates his past and identity in his vision and story. The past is nothing but fiction in Graham Swift’s novel. It is presented as visions introduced by the verb *see*, which is frequently repeated in order to allude to an eternal present time that incorporates all times. Bill Unwin frequently addresses his readers the invitation to imagine and recreate the past: “You have to picture the scene. You have to reconstruct the moment” (Swift 1992:197). He views his dead beloved relatives as if they were alive on a stage in front of him: “I see the two men in the little apiary at the far corner of the garden. I see Ruth pacing beside the tumbledown fence [...]. And now here is Matthew again, showing up with his face like the calm before a storm” (Swift 1992:196). The former “third-rate academic” (Swift 1992:123), Bill Unwin, who used to be his wife’s manager, presents his visions as possible stories of the past, admitting that we only read what he has invented. That is why he often uses the modal verbs *could* and *would*: “It was only the thought of the possibility. It could have been them, you see; it could have been Ruth and G – all along, not Ruth and me” (Swift 1992:123). Admitting that his account of the past does not present us the truth of the past, but only some fictional suppositions, Bill Unwin proves that he is the protagonist of what Linda Hutcheon (1988:105-123) calls “historiographic metafiction”, which “realizes that we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know the past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process” (Hutcheon 1988:122). Bill Unwin is an instance of what Linda Hutcheon (1988:117) calls “an overtly controlling narrator” who fails to present the objective reality of the past. As Hutcheon remarks,

First of all, historiographic metafiction appears to privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view [...] or an overtly controlling narrator [...]. In neither, however, do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty. This is not a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history (Hutcheon 1988:117).

The difference between the Real and the Fictional disappears. Not only is the past fictional but so is Bill Unwin’s identity. The narrator focuses on the theme of the world as a palimpsest on an eternal stage showing that his identity and his ancestor Matthew’s identity wear the masks of other past identities. He claims that he is both Bill Unwin and Hamlet the

Dane: "I am who I am. I am Bill Unwin (there, I declare myself!). I am Hamlet the Dane" (Swift 1992:172). At certain moments, he still questions his identity: "Who am I? Who am I? A nobody. An heirless nonentity. What's more – a bastard" (Swift 1992:246). His identity is constructed in the process of his narration and it is nothing but a story to be further reinterpreted by the readers. This idea that someone's identity is revealed by his own story is supported by Mark Currie in his book *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, where he shows that identity "exists only as narrative" (Currie 1998:17). Bill Unwin associates the "fiction of his life" (Swift 1992:171) with a fact, which is nothing but his discourse and story. This idea confirms the postmodernist theory put forward by Linda Hutcheon (1988:149) who shows that "facts in historiography are discursive, already interpreted (granted meaning)".

The narrator's deeply held conviction that identity is our own creation and that other past identities are mirrored in the present characters' identities is reinforced by the story of Matthew Pearce whose *Notebooks* Bill Unwin quotes and analyses. Matthew Pearce, Bill's ancestor, is presented with a reconstructed identity according to the narrator's vision: "Let Matthew be my creation" (Swift 1992:100). By comparing Matthew with Hamlet, whom Bill also identifies with, we are shown that the patterns of the past identities can be seen in the present ones: "Matthew was just another disillusioned idealist, an over-reactive Hamlet type – couldn't take it that the world was real" (Swift 1992:226). Bill Unwin recreates Matthew as his alter ego. Thus, we can notice that their ideas and writing styles are similar. Both characters rediscover their real identity after having been struck by misfortunes which make them either try to commit suicide (Bill's case) or abandon their family to forget about everything (Matthew's case). Matthew's life is presented as an *ever after* experience lived by Bill Unwin. The narrator's phrase "I see him" (Swift 1992:101) suggests that the figure of Matthew belongs to the present even if Matthew is Bill's ancestor whom he has never met. Matthew's story is presented as a possible story the same as Bill's life story. That is why the narrator repeats the modal verbs *would*, *could*, *must*, and the adverb *perhaps*, throughout his account of the past. Nothing is presented as certain but only as possible and fictional: "From his father Matthew would have inherited the conscientiousness, the self-reliance [...]. But from his mother he would have inherited his simple, sanguine faith. Susan Pearce was perhaps not exceptionally God-fearing" (Swift 1992:105). Bill quotes long passages from Matthew's *Notebooks* whose writing style resembles his own as we can remark the same emphasis laid on the modal verb *would* and on rhetorical questions. Bill Unwin turns his novel into a narrative poem, inviting the readers to imagine Matthew's world wherefrom the present world draws its energy and essence. By comparing Matthew with an ichthyosaur, an ancient creature whose traces are haunting him, the narrator alludes to the idea that the present exhibits the patterns of the past, that one's present identity reveals the patterns of other past identities. Therefore, Bill Unwin suggests that Matthew's identity is palimpsestic, the same as his own.

Focusing on the similarities between Bill Unwin's life story and Matthew's story, we are suggested that identities are nothing but repeated patterns on the stage of life. We can see the same play with a different background and different actors. For instance, just as Bill feels happiness only when his beloved wife is alive, Matthew feels happiness when his beloved son, Felix, is alive. Both characters, Bill and Matthew, lose their happiness and hope when they are deprived of their beloved relatives. Moreover, just as Bill Unwin presents moments of his past life as if they were scenes on a theatre stage, using the first person singular, Matthew's *Notebooks*, quoted in Graham Swift's novel, introduce us to similar life scenes on a stage. Similar to the way in which Bill wants to do away with his life, trying to commit suicide after his beloved wife's death, Matthew leaves his wife and the other children after his beloved son, Felix, dies. The same as Bill, Matthew believes in the mind's capacity to reconstruct a new world, which is nothing but a palimpsestic world: "Is there not in our minds, no less than in physical nature, a power of regeneration and renewal? Are we not

lopped and smitten only so we will grow again” (Swift 1992:144). Just as Bill associates the Real and the Literary World with an illusion, Matthew associates the written Bible with “mere poetry, like the Rector’s Virgil” (Swift 1992:149) and life with fiction: “And they were, by his own description, the record of his life as a fiction: ‘the beginning of my make-belief’.” (Swift 1992:195)

Approached in a postmodernist manner in a novel which can be included into “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 1988:105-123), the concepts of time and identity are palimpsestic in Graham Swift’s *Ever After*. They are recreated according to the narrator’s vision and cultural background. Both time and identity are reconstructed from memories and are highly reminiscent of other past times and identities. As fictional constructs, time and identity are subject to different possible interpretations given by the modal verbs *would*, *could*, *must*.

### 3. The Symbols of the Palimpsestic World in Graham Swift’s *Ever After*

Starting from the definition of the palimpsest as “a surface, usually vellum or parchment, which has been used more than once for writing on, the previous writing having been rubbed out or somehow removed” (Cuddon 1999:631), the world of Graham Swift’s novel *Ever After* can be defined as palimpsestic. The narrator of the novel, Bill Unwin, claims that the world he evokes in his writing is palimpsestic: “I must have seen it once – many times – that living palimpsest” (Swift 1992:213). This idea is supported by the fact that Bill Unwin admits that his life story as well as his past have been reinvented and rewritten in his account. He views the world as our creation which is subject to interpretations in a postmodernist fashion. He compares fiction with “what doesn’t exist” (Swift 1992:243), wondering what the function of literature is and suggestively associating it with the symbol of *honey*. Therefore, fiction, which Bill Unwin associates with the past and with his present reality, is our sweet food for thought in the absence of any real evidence of historical truth. That is why Bill Unwin invites us to ponder on the meaning of three recurrent symbols in the novel – *the plastic*, *the clock* and *the Notebook* – which stand for his palimpsestic world and time.

The narrator of Graham Swift’s *Ever After* makes a clear distinction between his past life before attempting to commit suicide and his present life after having survived his suicidal act. He compares his present life with life “in plastic” (Swift 1992:12), which is a vulnerable, untrustworthy creation subject to change and destruction. He views *plastic* as “the epitome of the false” (Swift 1992:10). His new life “in plastic” (Swift 1992:12) stands for a life devoid of love, energy, hope as well as for a life devoid of a clear identity. His story evokes his desperate search for his real identity, being haunted by a past which he considers to be just fictional. Claiming that he is “a plastics heir” (Swift 1992:9), he indicates that his own past is as dissatisfying as his present. He shows that he has inherited a false identity as the knowledge he has had of his real father turns out to be false. He is no longer able to recognize himself – “I have become someone else” (Swift 1992:6) – and the words he writes do not seem familiar to him. His real self seems to have turned into a false one associated with *plastic*. He believes that the *plastic* is the replacement of the Real and remembers the moment of his childhood when Sam told him: “You see what you can do with plastic, pal? Everything’s an exact replica of the real thing” (Swift 1992:72). Remembering how he had to rearrange the plastic pieces of the plane he had received as a gift and how he had to arrange the plastic pilot in his cockpit, he compares his creative capacity with the will of destiny: “I was like the hand of fate itself” (Swift 1992:72). The *plastic* stands for a human creation at the mercy of fate. Associating his present identity with *plastic*, Bill Unwin implies that it is palimpsestic.

Bill Unwin's palimpsestic world is also symbolized by *the clock* received as a gift from his mother, "a wedding gift over successive generations" (Swift 1992:51). The clock stands for an eternal time which marks all generations. It resists historical change and what Frederick M. Holmes (1997:83) calls "the historical imagination". According to Holmes (1997:83), "Swift's novel betrays an awareness that the historical imagination cannot ultimately defeat time. The unequal contest is symbolized in *Ever After* in the clock". In Graham Swift's novel, the clock ensures the continuity of life, love, hope, as well as the continuity of the past in the present. Keeping it wound shows the characters' resolution to further live their life and fulfil their aspirations. It symbolizes the present past and the present future. If not wound up, it brings about one's death: "Ever since that moment of panic, less than two days after her death, when I remembered that the clock had not been wound (but it had not stopped), it has been my resolution never to let the clock wind down" (Swift 1992:53). Bill Unwin explains that the same clock used to belong to his ancestor Matthew, who considered time man's creation: "Time, this stuff which Matthew still thought of as being essentially human in meaning, the companion and guardian of human affairs" (Swift 1992:115).

Another symbol which stands for Bill Unwin's palimpsestic world is the *Notebook*. It offers Bill and us a glimpse of the past and shows that the present is nothing but a redefined and recreated past. Bill quotes Matthew's *Notebooks* and analyses them in order to understand the past. He suggests that these *Notebooks* do not evoke the historical truth due to the missing details he has to fill in. Moreover, he emphasizes the fact that they are nothing but fiction: "And they were, by his own description, the record of his life as a fiction: 'the beginning of my make-belief'." (Swift 1992:195) Matthew's *Notebooks* stand for the rewritten past which turns into a story. Analysing the quoted *Notebook* fragments and Bill's story, we can notice that Bill Unwin's present is highly reminiscent of his ancestor's past (Matthew's past) and that is why it can be associated with a palimpsest.

#### 4. Conclusion

A postmodernist novel which supports the theories of postmodernism put forward by Linda Hutcheon (1988) and Mark Currie (1998), Graham Swift's *Ever After* evinces the narrator's art of recreating the past and his identity based on his cultural background and vision. The concepts of time and identity are fictional constructs subject to various interpretations given by the modal verbs *would*, *could*, *must*. They stand for a palimpsestic world presented as an eternal stage of past and present stories. One's identity is rewritten and reconstructed from memories, being highly reminiscent of other identities which are referred to by means of quotations and comparisons. The symbols of *the clock*, *the plastic* and *the Notebook* stand for the palimpsestic nature of time, identity and the world in Graham Swift's novel. Analysing it, one can notice that only fiction and discourse evince their remarking novelty which prevails over an eternal palimpsestic time.

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**Note on the author**

**Elisabeta Simona CATANĂ** is Lecturer of English at the Department of Communication in Modern Languages in the Polytechnic University of Bucharest, Romania. She holds a PhD in Philology awarded by the West University of Timișoara in 2010. She has participated in many international conferences and her published papers include essays on literary topics, on English language teaching and e-learning.